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pour le Progrès de l'Homme



Charter of Human Responsibilities

New challenges: new dimensions of Responsibility

At present, international life is underpinned by two agreements: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which focuses on the dignity and entitlements of people as individuals and on the defense of their rights, and the Charter of the United Nations, which focuses on peace and development. These two agreements have been a framework for undeniable progress in the organization of international relations. But the last fifty years have seen radical global changes. Humankind now confronts new challenges; in particular, the imperative to safeguard the environment for future generations has come into view. It is clear that the two initial agreements need a further dimension to respond to current and future challenges of survival. 'Responsibility' is proposed as an ethical concept which builds on Rights and Peace as well as the emergence of a relational worldview that ensures the viability of planet earth and its peoples.

Preamble

Never before have human beings had such far-reaching impacts on one another's social, political, economic, and cultural lives. Never before have they possessed so much knowledge and so much power to change their environment. In spite of the immense possibilities opened up by these ever-increasing inter-relationships, and in spite of the new skills which humankind has acquired, unprecedented crises are emerging in many areas.

The growing interdependence among individuals, among societies, and between human beings and nature heightens the impacts of individual and collective human actions on their social and natural environments, in the short and long run. And yet, the social institutions which should enable the new challenges of the 21st century to be met, are increasingly ineffective. The pervasive power of international markets is undermining the traditional role of states. Scientific institutions, pursuing specialized interests, are less likely to confront the global issues which challenge humanity. International economic institutions have failed to turn the rising tide of inequality. Business has often pursued its profit goals at the expense of

social and environmental concerns. Religious institutions have not adequately fulfilled their role to provide responses to the new challenges faced by our societies.

In this context, every one of us must take up his or her responsibilities at both the individual and the collective level. New possibilities are opening up to play a role in the new challenges that face humankind: every human being has a role to play in redefining responsibility and has responsibilities to assume. The feeling of being powerless can be lessened and even overcome by linking up with others to forge a collective strength.

Although all people have an equal entitlement to human rights, their responsibilities are proportionate to the possibilities open to them. Freedom, access to information, knowledge, wealth, and power all increase the capacity for exercising responsibilities and the duty to account for one's actions.

Responsibilities are related to the present and the future, as well as to past actions. The burden of collectively-caused damage must be morally acknowledged by the group concerned, and put right in practical terms as far as possible. Since we can only partially understand the consequences of our actions now and in the future, our responsibility demands that we must act with humility and demonstrate caution.

Principles to Guide the Exercise of Human Responsibilities

1. We are all responsible for making sure that Human Rights are affirmed in our ways of thinking and in our actions.
2. Every person's dignity involves contributing to the freedom and dignity of others.
3. Responsibilities include ensuring the fulfilment of human potential, inclusive of material needs and non-material aspirations, as well as obligations to support the common good.
4. Lasting peace can only be expected from freedom, justice, and processes for reconciliation which are respectful of human dignity and human rights.
5. Development and consumption of natural resources to meet human needs, and the quest for prosperity must be backed by a commitment to sustainability and the principle of precaution, assuring pro-active protection of the environment, careful management of its diversity, and equitable sharing of wealth.
6. The full potential of knowledge and know-how is achieved through valuing different knowledge systems and ways of knowing, including indigenous knowledge, sharing them, and applying them in the service of unifying solidarity and a pluralistic culture of peace.

7. Freedom of scientific research implies being guided by ethical criteria such as enhancement of biodiversity, respect for human dignity and non-human forms of life, and regard for the limitations of human knowledge.
8. The exercise of power is legitimate where it serves the common good, and if it is accountable to those over whom it is exercised.
9. In reaching decisions about short-term priorities, evaluation of long-term consequences must concur with ethical priorities of justice and inter-generational environmental stewardship, taking into account both risks and uncertainties.
10. To face the challenges of today and of tomorrow, uniting in action must be balanced with respect for cultural specificities.

Responsibility: a key notion for the 21st century

Widening economic gaps within and between nations, the concentration of economic and political power in ever-fewer hands, threats to cultural diversity, and the over-exploitation of natural resources are creating unrest and conflicts world-wide and giving rise to deep concerns about the future of our planet. We are at a crossroads in human history.

Human beings are part of a 'woven universe' which is balanced and integrated in ways that are still far beyond human knowledge. Given the growing appreciation that human well-being is interdependent with earth systems, a re-definition of responsibility is needed in order to extend personal responsibility in the present to collective responsibility for the future.

We can express responsibility in many ways, among them accepting responsibility for the direct and indirect consequences of our actions in the short as well as the long run, joining with others and uniting for effective action. The fact that responsibility is proportionally linked to knowledge and the exercise of power does not mean that those with limited resources and influence would not be in a position to exercise responsibility at their own level and link up with others to forge a collective strength.

Responsibility is more than an ethical principle to be used at the personal level; rather, it is a commitment we make as citizens who are part of a social identity. The initiative of the Charter of Human Responsibilities encourages the exploration of the values that underpin this identity.